

■ ART

The Purest Dreamer

On his centenary, a lavish show celebrates the vision of Joan Miró

By ROBERT HUGHES

MIRÓ, IN SPANISH, MEANS “he saw”—an absurdly good name for a painter. Joan Miró died 10 years ago, and 1993 marks the centenary of his birth. It has been celebrated in Spain, where the centerpiece was a large retrospective in Barcelona. An even bigger Miró show is now at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City: 291 paintings, drawings, sculptures and ceramics, put together by art historian Carolyn Lanchner. Miró got his first retrospective, at MOMA, more than half a century ago, and now he is getting the treatment reserved for the heaviest guns of 20th century art.

Miró was a marvelous artist—some of the time. But he was also a painter with definite limitations, which began to show when, fairly late in his career, he started working on what one thinks of as an American scale. It is hard to bring to

mind any of those big, late canvases—a blue field with a few dots on it and a squiggle or two—that one would willingly swap for one of his fiercely impacted little canvases from the 1920s, like *Petri dishes* swarming with bizarre and emblematic micro-organisms.

Wisely, Lanchner has concentrated on the best Miró years, from 1915 to about 1960, and skipped the enormous output of prints and the flood of repetitious paintings he turned out in the last quarter-century of his life. But this takes nothing away from the brilliance, even genius, of his earlier work—especially in the '20s and '30s, when he was making the finest paintings associated with the Surrealist movement.

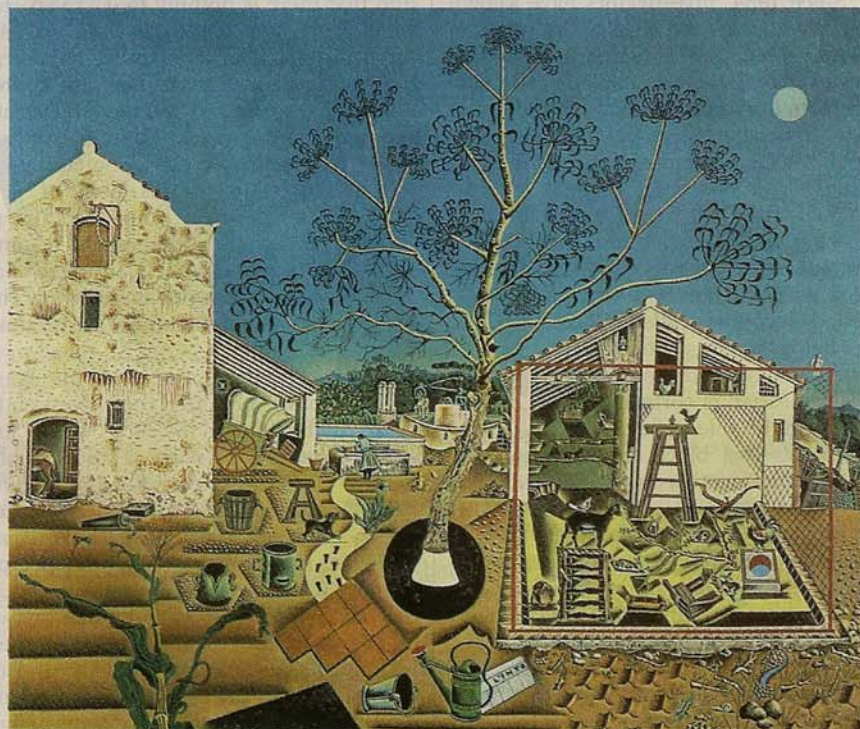
Miró always used to be referred to as “the great Spanish artist,” which is technically true but culturally wrong. He was a Catalan artist, and the difference—as anyone who knows Catalans will know—mattered greatly to him. Catalans like to think of their culture as both older than

most of Spain's (Barcelona was a great medieval city when Madrid was mud huts) and newer as well—the roof on which the rain of north European avant-gardes fell before its patter reached the rest of Spain.

If there's one artist who exemplifies this, it's Miró, in whose work the archaic and local got fused to the new and unpredictable, with scarcely a cushion between the two. Miró's “internationalism” was largely the result of fame and an art-distribution system that became pan-European and then, after World War II, transatlantic. But the real stem of his imagination was intensely provincial, rooted in the Catalan compost; it was shaped, it is true, by the influence of Cubism and then by his immersion in the Surrealist avant-garde during the '20s, but drew its tenacious fantasy from sources as deep as those of his great Catalan predecessor, the architect Antoni Gaudí. Miró's work is Catalan and French—rather as that of border-crossing troubadours in the 15th century had been. It constitutes one of the great oeuvres of modernist painting, and it probably would not do so if he had not been exposed to the challenge of Paris and the stimulus of Surrealism.

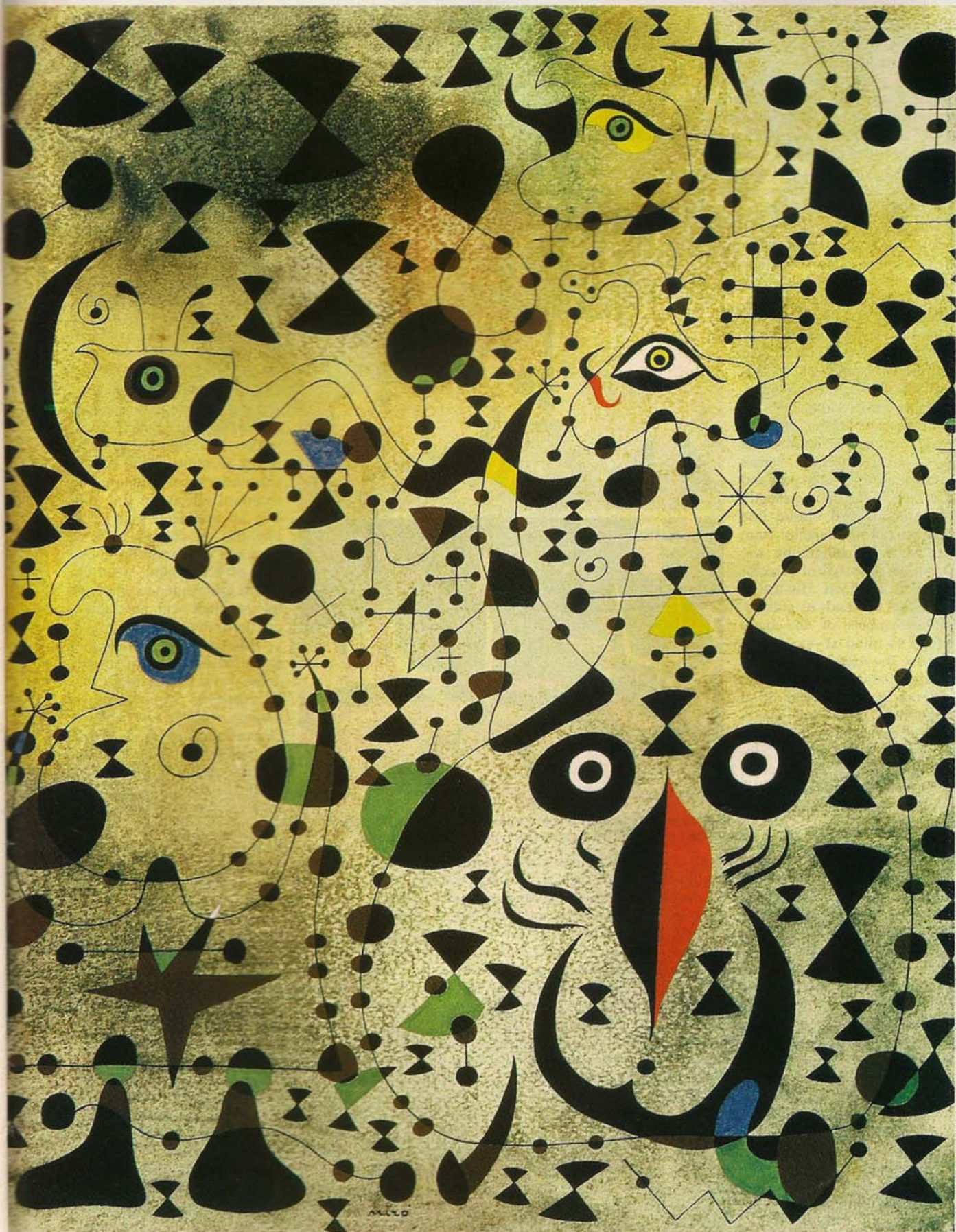
Miró was born and raised in Barcelona. But his parents had a farm near Tarragona, at Montroig, where he spent a good part of his youth from 1911 on, starting with recovery from an attack of typhoid fever coupled with a mild nervous breakdown. It is tempting to relate the extraordinary sharpness of focus, the dreamlike distinctness of Miró's early rural images to the fevered impressionability of a convalescent mind. The countryside in general, and Montroig in particular, would always exercise a peculiar fascination for Miró—the symbol of what Catalans call *enyoranca*—a sort of global, unappeasable nostalgia.

Miró was set on going to Paris, knowing perfectly well that the French avant-garde set a standard against which his own burgeoning inventiveness could be tested. But it is significant that when he finally got there in 1921, he took with him a handful of dried grass from Montroig as a talisman of memory, to help him with



THE FARM: a summation of memory with the clarity of a Renaissance townscape; at right, from the **CONSTELLATIONS** series: unity of forms dancing in deep space

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON, D.C.; GIFT OF MARTHE MINGHAY



MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK, ACQUIRED THROUGH LILLIE P. BLISS BEQUEST

the big painting he rightly considered his first masterpiece: *The Farm*. Frontal as a nursery ark, bathed in the raking dreamlight of early morning and constructed with the geometrical clarity of a Renaissance townscape, this was Miró's summation of memory. As its first owner, Ernest Hemingway, wrote, "It has in it all that you feel about Spain when you are there and all that you feel when you are away and cannot go there. No one else has been able to paint these two very opposing things."

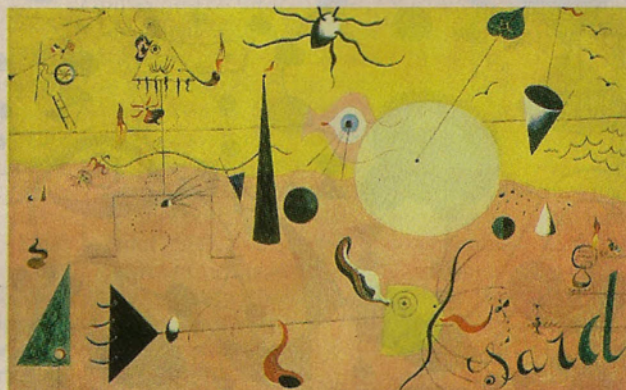
It was Miró's power of recall as much as anything else that caused the Surrealists to adopt him. His own habits conformed oddly with the Surrealists'. He was shy, abstemious, almost obsessively neat, and faithful to his wife. But he was the purest dreamer in Paris, and they needed him.

Like most art that is genuinely inventive, as distinct from passingly novel, Miró's images grew from the past and drew on it for their strength. His sinuous and elastic line took part of its character from Art Nouveau calligraphy, the pervasive civic style of Barcelona in his boyhood. His use of huge feet or hands as autonomous symbols of the body comes to mind at once when you see the exaggerated limbs of the Catalan Romanesque frescoes he loved and often consulted. Time and again, looking at carved Romanesque capitals and tympana in Catalan churches, from Ripoll in the north to Tarragona in the south, you catch yourself breathing his name.

His bestiary of images, wild and swarming and drawn with a line as exact as a knife's cut, comes from multiple sources. One, obviously, was Hieronymus Bosch. Another was the decorative art of Islamic Spain, with its precise yet often hallucinatory stylization of animal and vegetable shapes; the first sign of its incursion into Miró's work is the 1918 *Standing Nude*, whose sturdy body, divided with Cubist (or at any rate, cubified) wrinkles, poses against a drapery covered with arabesques and birds. And there were the mosaic inventions of the Catalan artist Josep Marià Jujol, who worked for Gaudí when Miró was a teenager, and whose wandering line and isolated words in tile clearly stayed in Miró's mind as he did his poem-pictures.

Miró's work thereafter would stay populated with images of specifically Catalan identity. "Hard at work and full

of enthusiasm," he reported to a friend from Montroig in 1923. "All the pictorial problems resolved. We must explore all the golden sparks of our souls." *The Hunter (Catalan Landscape)*, 1923-24, is full of such sparks, starting with the figure of the hunter himself, with his floppy cap—the traditional *barretina*, which is to *Catalunya* roughly what Stetsons are to Texas—and his heart, burning with neat little flames of patriotic ardor, somewhat resembling an anarchist's grenade about to go off.



THE HUNTER: Catalan fantasy; below, **MAN AND WOMAN IN FRONT OF A PILE OF EXCREMENT:** decorative scatology

Much barer works followed: the astonishing series of a dozen or so large landscapes that Miró produced in Montroig in 1926 and 1927, which include *Dog Barking at the Moon*, *Animated Landscape* and *Landscape with Rabbit and Flower*. It is as hard to account for the spell of the last of these as it is to evade it. It is quintessential Miró—a field divided roughly in half by a rambling horizon line, the earth featureless and red, the sky equally featureless (except for the ceremonious care with which the paint has been deposited) and blue. In the sky hangs a thing like a bladder, with a thin black line dangling to earth: the "flower." The "rabbit," a sort of yellow Shmoo, regards it from below. There is nothing else. It ought to be ridiculous, but it is profoundly haunting, full of an indefinable melancholy provoked by what Miró

identified as his work's main motif: "tiny forms in vast empty spaces." And you are always struck by the sheer amount of work that he lavished upon those tiny forms. The bugs and dogs, even the genital hairs, of Miró's imagination live because of the graphic care expended on them: his solicitude makes them vibrant, his consciousness becomes theirs.

Miró claimed that his landscapes "have nothing whatever to do with outer reality. Nevertheless they are more *Montroig* than if they had been painted from nature." His work was to have an immense influence on abstract painting—What would American artists in the '40s, from Arshile Gorky onward, have done without him?—and yet it never lost its sense of wonder at the world or ceased to anchor itself in sharp little signs and pictographs denoting the specific. Its utter conviction is furthered by Miró's resort to painstaking, almost old-masterly construction and technical effects: in the mid-'30s he produced a series of tiny oils on copper, such as *Man and Woman in Front of a Pile of Excrement*, 1935, in which grotesqueness and scatology collide with an enameler's decorative sense.

The climax of Miró's talent for oscillating between the general and the particular was 23 modestly sized paintings known, collectively, as the *Constellations*, most of which he painted in Mallorca, after fleeing occupied France, in 1940-41. MOMA has managed to assemble all of them—a real feat of curatorial borrowing power. The recurrent shapes in these are two black forms—the circle and a bow tie, or diabolito—which overlap and dance in deep space in swarms, with uncanny and magical precision, alternating with other signs from his repertoire: eye, face, star, vagina, hairs, moon, bird. They are defined and linked by a wonderfully stringent and rhythmic play of black lines. These virtually define Miró's vision of cosmic unity, a pictorial feat of the highest order.

You can imagine Miró's Gothic ancestors nodding in approval at such miniatures. Their concentrated energy seems to have carried the artist along for another decade. But though he painted many a good picture afterward, he was never to repeat this sustained burst of inspiration. See the *Constellations* now if you can: it will be a very long time, if ever, before they are all lined up again. ■